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PODCAST

What Your Employees Need to Know

They probably don't know how they're performing. Feedback and recognition are among the lowest rated workplace elements.

by Steve Crabtree

Employees generally don't need feedback and recognition to meet their minimum responsibilities each day. After all, as long as workers know what they're supposed to be doing and have the tools they need to do it, they should be able to get the job done, right? Put another way: Are feedback and recognition essential in the workplace?

Well actually, yes. Personalized feedback and recognition aren't just "frills" that make workers feel good. Rather, they are crucial predictors of positive workplace outcomes such as employee retention and productivity. These attributes may not seem necessary to keep a workplace functioning -- but they do increase the chances that it will function well. Yet a global study of employee engagement shows that workers around the world least often given high ratings to items related to feedback and recognition.

Measuring the elements of engagement worldwide

Gallup researchers recently conducted the first assessment of employee engagement worldwide using the Q¹², Gallup's 12-item assessment of engagement. Decades of research has proven that these items distinguish the most productive and successful workplaces from the rest. More than 47,000 employed respondents in 116 countries, from Canada to Qatar, were asked to respond to these 12 items.

In most global regions, two items were the most poorly rated among the 12: "In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work" and "In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress." (See sidebar "Recognition and Feedback Lacking.")

Recognition and Feedback Lacking

Recently, Gallup conducted its first global assessment of employee engagement using the Q¹², its 12-item assessment of engagement, with more than 47,000 employed respondents in 116 countries. Based on their responses, employees worldwide least often agreed that in the last seven days, they had received recognition or praise for doing good work or that in the last six months, someone at work had talked to them about their progress. On the plus side, employees most often agreed that they know what is expected of them at work and that they have the materials and equipment they need to do their work right.

Q¹² employee engagement items

Ranked by level of agreement among respondents worldwide

I know what is expected of me at work.

I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.

At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.

My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.

The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.

I have a best friend at work.

At work, my opinions seem to count.

My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.

There is someone at work who encourages my development.

This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.

In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.

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In virtually all 116 countries, the Q¹² item that received the highest average rating was one of the most basic: "I know what is expected of me at work." That makes sense. No organization would last very long if its employees did not have a good idea of why they were there or what they were supposed to be doing. Gallup also analyzed engagement in 13 global regions. In most of these areas, the item "I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right" is among the most highly rated.

At the bottom of the rankings is the item that asks employees whether someone at work has talked to them about their progress in the last six months. This low ranking suggests that employers and managers don't provide workers with regular, individualized feedback. This may be because organizations lack processes that give employees the input they need to improve their job performance. Frontline managers may also be overlooking opportunities to talk with their employees



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performance. Fortune managers may also be overlooking opportunities to ask their own employees about what they need to remain engaged and productive at work.

The next lowest rated item, "In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work," similarly addresses the importance of feedback -- or positive reinforcement that gives all employees a clear idea of what success means in their organization and in their role. In all 13 global regions, these items were either the most poorly rated of the 12 or two of the three most poorly rated.

A global blind spot?

Why are these items consistently among the most poorly rated worldwide? In many cases, managers simply fail to recognize their importance, says Jim Harter, Ph.D., chief scientist, workplace management and wellbeing for Gallup's workplace management practice. "Managers often assume they give enough feedback or that people naturally know how well they are doing. Or managers assume that if they give no feedback, people will assume they are doing fine," Harter says. "But our studies show that the best managers around the world provide feedback regularly. Expectations are set and continually clarified through ongoing performance feedback and recognition."

In some areas, social or cultural effects may further suppress feedback and recognition in the workplace. Managers may lack a predisposition to highlight employees' unique contributions, and workers may be happy to stay "under the radar" of authority figures. In their book *12: The Elements of Great Managing*, Harter and coauthor Rodd Wagner tell the story of a warehouse manager in Poland who began to implement a new feedback and recognition system with her employees. Not used to the attention, the workers downplayed their own efforts -- in the manager's words, they were still learning "that their heads will not be cut off if they receive public praise." (See "A Manager's Revolutionary Idea at International Paper" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

Implications

Given the low ratings worldwide for feedback and recognition, organizations that implement -- or countries that encourage -- effective feedback and recognition systems could gain a competitive advantage. For example, Russian labor productivity is among the lowest in the world; experts cite outdated technology, but poor management and business processes also play a role. Motivating employees in countries like Russia to excel in their roles -- rather than just exerting the minimum effort to get by -- requires a critical shift in mindset and approach.

Gallup's experience suggests that instilling frequent personalized feedback and recognition is one of the surest ways to drive that shift in workplaces worldwide. And it may take less time than one might think. "It's interesting that the two lowest rated elements are also the two that produce the quickest changes in organizations, once measurement and good education is put in place," Harter says. "And because they are both linked to performance outcomes, in many cases those outcomes can be affected relatively quickly as well."

Steve Crabtree is a writer for Gallup. He contributed to writing *Building Engaged Schools*, Gallup's book on education reform. [Learn More >>](#)

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Reader Comments

DAVID WILLEN POSTED ON 4/15/2011 3:16:50 PM

I just learned and found it interesting that the technology tools companies world-wide believe will best improve productivity seem to be focused on understanding and interacting with customers better (so we are focused on the right things) and collaborating internally among ourselves (see link below). The key to success seems to be collaboration and leadership - or caring about and focusing on others - especially our employees.

Regards,
David Willden

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KEN MCDANIEL POSTED ON 5/6/2011 12:14:50 PM

I feel this article and the low ratings of recognition speaks volumes of what is important to employees. Unfortunately too many managers don't see the need to recognize and deliver feedback to employees. The more feedback you deliver consistently makes it easier to deliver critical feedback when necessary. The book "The Carrot Principle" contains great information in the recognition arena and will assist in this area.

Ken McDaniel


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